



A Childhood in Kentucky

By CAROLINE OWSLEY BROWN

Drawings by John Wolcott Adams

that once, moved by the spirit of curiosity, I asked the amount of her dower, and was told that it was thirteen thousand dollars in cash and a farm. Such were the modest ideas of fortune held by our ancestors.

The bridegroom built a fine red-brick house on his wife's estate, to which he brought his own inherited and acquired slaves, and proceeded to rear to womanhood and manhood a family of nine fair daughters and two sons, losing one son in infancy. The home was truly a patriarchal mansion, such as the people of to-day can scarcely comprehend and few would wish to emulate.

But I have always been glad that I had the experience, and in some lesser degree could imitate the mother I lost in her beautiful young womanhood. While my grandfather rejoiced in nine daughters, he had had only two sons; so when he felt he needed my father, my mother quite cheerfully closed her own home in a distant county, and went to live in her father-in-law's house, taking not only her two little daughters, but her two sisters and her brother, to whom my father was guardian. Seven is not a small addition to a family already fourteen in number. It seemed an altogether

A LITTLE girl of seventy years ago! As I write these words, it seems a long way to look back; and yet as I look, I grow shorter in stature, recollections rush freshly through my mind, and the Kentucky home in which my earliest years were passed stands bright against its background of sugar maples and green sod. My grandfather, Harry Hawkins Owsley, sheriff of Lincoln County, Kentucky, married the heiress of the country-side in the year of 1815. He was a bachelor of thirty, and she, a maiden of fifteen. I had heard so often of my grandmother's wealth

natural and satisfactory state of affairs, however, and I never heard it questioned.

The house was of the usual colonial type, with a big porch in front, opening into a hall, with rooms on each side and other rooms opening out of these—a house that had evidently been added to in a rambling way as the family needs increased. True, the thought will occasionally intrude: Where did we all sleep? I can answer only for my sister and myself, as I distinctly recall that we slept in a trundle-bed, a low bed on rollers that modestly retired during the day under the big mahogany four-poster in which my parents slept, and was discreetly hidden from view by a deep, white valance that had a knotted fringe adorning it.

This was the day of the melting black eye, the marble brow, and raven curl, all of which my sister possessed. I think, had any one been daring enough to invest a heroine of fiction with auburn locks, he would have been hooted out of the country. Not only was the hue not admired, but it was counted almost a disgrace. A gentility was shown me whenever the subject of hair was mentioned, and my father early gave me a lead comb warranted to turn my ruddy locks to a dark brown. Sisters were always dressed exactly alike, and, as my sister Anne was a beauty, the delicate rose pinks that brought out her loveliness did not enhance her older sister's color scheme.

My grandfather and my father together had over a hundred slaves, and it was a great task to keep them employed. My grandfather did not believe in slavery, indeed was one of the earliest antislavery men of the South, and as his principles did not allow him

to sell any of the negroes, and the law did not permit him to set them free, he was in a state of much difficulty. I can clearly recall, too, the dread with which we viewed a county deputation who waited on him to say that no more negroes on his place should be taught to read. On inquiry it was found that a young aunt of twelve had taught the farm carpenter his letters. On grandfather's promising that no such crime should be committed again, some of Kentucky's native beverage was handed round, and the gentlemen withdrew.

Many devices, both from economy and to furnish employment to the negroes, were resorted to. We had a house with two big looms in it where all the home-spun,—we called it "jeans,"—woolen, cotton, and flax, was woven that clothed the negroes. There was a big dairy, a cool, lovely place, built over a running stream, where the red crocks were balanced on flat stones to anchor them safely. Next to this was a cheese-room, where great round cheeses ripened. Beyond the field stood a blacksmith-shop and a shoemaker-shop, where Uncle Eli, as black as the ace of spades, was kept busy all the time making shoes. There was a carpenter-shop also.

What if housewives of to-day possessed a hundred helpless people whom they had to see were fed and clothed, or nursed in illness; had to weigh all household supplies both for the family and the slaves; cut out all the clothing, see that the women sewed it, and apportion it to each family according to the needs of each; go to the store-room and measure out the flour, sugar, corn-meal, starch, pickles, and preserves; look into the smoke-house to see that its varied contents of ham, side meat, and sausage were all right; go into the



"She had dealings with the evil one"

fruit and vegetable cellar to learn if the apples did not need looking over or that the potatoes were not rotting? If any one thinks that a Southern woman trod a primrose path, let him remember that all this had to be done by the mistress of the house or by one of her daughters. My grandmother had a big medicine-box from which she dispensed pills and powders, and liberal doses of castor-oil and calomel, for ordinary ailments, and then, if these failed, the doctor was called to bleed the patient. It was the heroic age of medicine.

One of our favorite amusements was to run down to the big gate, climb to the top of the fence, and watch the passers-by. There was an almost endless procession of white, cloth-covered wagons, and some one of us never failed to sing out, "Where are you going to and where did you come from?" I can still hear, "Comin' from Posey County, Indiana, and goin' back to South Ca'liny." They were an unhealthy, yellow-complexioned lot

of people. Often they craved leave to camp "thar and git water and water the critters," which my gentle old grandfather always allowed, and would send corn-meal and eggs and milk down by the ready hands of the children. If any one was sick, my grandmother went down and administered pills and powders to the patient. Once, I remember, a vender of patent medicines, passing down the turnpike, had the misfortune to have his horse die in front of the house, and traded many hundred boxes of Halloway's pills in exchange for a charger to replace the one lost. My grandmother was wrathful at first at my grandfather for taking them, saying that she preferred to mix her own blue mass; but the boxes bore a most enticing list of all ills under the sun which they were warranted to cure, and really they must have been harmless, for we took them for all diseases, and none of us died.

Not all the passers down that winding pike were cheerful ones, for I can recall long lines of negroes chained two

by two to an iron chain that clanked as they slouched along, a sorrowful, sometimes a ferocious, procession of men and women going down to the cotton- and tobacco-fields of the South. How my heart swelled with pity for them! I did not know exactly what "going down South" meant, but something dreadful, I feared; for if at any time a servant was disobedient or lazy, the threat, "If you don't do better, you will be sold South," was sufficient to tame the most refractory. Even negro mothers would quell a crying child by saying, "Old marse will sell you Souf if you holler so loud."

This dread of the South was exceeded only by the fear of being sent to Liberia. About this time the Liberia Colonization Society was trying to solve the problem of slavery. It was a very expensive experiment, for not only was there the cost of the long journey, but the colonist must be fitted with a settler's outfit and means to maintain himself until there was some return from his crops. Such dark tales came back of fever and snakes and alligators "that jes waited to gobble you down befo' you could git on

shore," that it was a brave negro indeed who could be persuaded to purchase freedom at such a price. My grandfather sent two, but could not induce any more to follow.

The gold fever of 1849 struck Kentucky, and my father's elder brother, having an adventurous spirit, took five

men and started on that long journey across the plains. The negro men were to have their freedom after two years of work. The news came back of their safe arrival and of their having struck gold, and the negro carpenter whom my aunt had taught to read sent her the first gold he mined, which she had made into a ring and wears to-day. But, alas! my uncle shot himself while hunting, and died, and California was far away in those days, and we never heard what became of the negroes. We did hear that Sam, the carpenter, tried to buy his wife, who belonged on a neighboring plantation.

But her owner, who was a notoriously mean man, asked him two thousand dollars for her; and Sam wrote him he could buy a wife in California cheaper than that, and made no further effort.

The quarters for the negroes were built at a distance from the house, and from the turnpike had the appearance



(John Watson's drawing)

"She was too small to do anything but tag around after me"

of a small village. Each house had a little garden where a few vegetables and flowers were cultivated, and sometimes a small patch of tobacco. As I remember them, the negroes seemed a jolly, laughing, care-free race, singing, patting Juba, and dancing what they called a "hoe-down." One old woman called a Guinea negro was held in great awe by the rest of the negroes; they regarded her as having some supernatural powers. She was a tall, slender old woman of a bright-yellow color, always trimly dressed, with slender hands and feet. She claimed that she came from Africa and that her father was a king. Certainly she made no effort to disclaim that she had dealings with the

evil one, and we children stood in great fear of her. The negroes lived principally on fat pork and corn-bread, beans and potatoes, and such vegetables as were in season. They had a woman, Aunt Rosy, who cooked for them alone. They could never bear to have white folks watch them eat, and I can recall being sent into the house on such occasions.

Convenience could not have been a prime factor in Southern life, since all kitchens were fully forty or fifty feet away from the dining-room and in a separate building. Hot dishes for meals were borne in by waiters who ran at full speed, carrying the dishes in their uplifted hands.

Very often on the birth of a baby, a negro child near its own age was given to it, and the two were not only inseparable companions in childhood, but the association lasted through later years, the slave becoming the maid or body-servant of the mistress or master. I never heard the word valet used in Kentucky; it was always body-servant. My father was much attached to William, his body-servant, and brought him to St. Louis when we came to Illinois; but there he had to leave him, as the law did not permit a man to bring a negro into a free State. William was left with instructions to steal his way across the Missis-



"To be a lady, you must play on the piano"

issippi, and it was nearly a year before we heard a knock one morning, and in came a smiling black face, with "Here I is, Marse John." William had arrived. I am sorry to add that William fell a victim to the charms of a "yaller gal" whose name was Rose and whose character was far from good, and they reared a numerous progeny. I often hear of persons bearing the family name being taken up in Jacksonville and Decatur for petty larceny.

A negro girl of about my own age was given to me. I tyrannized over her, but I loved her. I do not think I should have loved her if I could have helped it, for even at that early age I was fully aware of the difference in our positions; but little Liz was so devoted to me that I could not help but love her in return. She was too small to do anything but tag around after me, and many were the interesting happenings we saw in that complex household.

Every morning we all gathered at the horse-block to see my aunts and the numberless house guests go on their daily rides, and I can recall how jealous every maid was of the beauty and horsemanship of her own lady. My aunt Susan's maid once said: "I bet you none of them ladies can beat my Miss Suse. Law! you ought to see her r'ar back on her trinity and ride off lak a queen!" I do not recall ever sitting at the first table with the white folks. Such honor was not for my years. In those ante-bellum days children were always served at a second table after the grown people had finished. What anguish filled our hearts at the frequent announcement, "White folks done et all de biscuits; you chillen got to eat co'n-bread." But such was our awe of Aunt Rindy, the

big, fat black genius who presided over the kitchen, that no murmur against her providing ever reached her. Indeed, I think that even my grandmother did not correct Aunt Rindy much. I do recall a tradition that my grandfather once passed Aunt Rindy leaning against a door and pushed her aside.

"Whut you pushin' me fur, Marse Harry? I ain't doin' nothin'," declared the colored autocrat.

"Just what I am pushing you for, Rindy," answered her master.

Our house was in a yard filled with trees, and a winding road led down to the turnpike. On one side was the garden, my grandmother's garden. Delectable place! There was a plant called ambrosia, a long, green wreath-like affair, with tiny balls of a bitter, aromatic odor. It was a lovely plant, and lent itself to any scheme of decoration. I can recall one special occasion when a young aunt wove it into a bridal wreath for Jane, a tall, black housemaid who was to be "nunitied in merriage" to Mesty, the butler. At least he would be called the butler now, for he served in the dining-room; but we called him "You Mesty." My aunt was a young woman of original conceptions, and placed three tiny red tomatoes in the very front of the wreath as a crowning point of beauty. We called them "love apples," but they are more prosaically known as "cherry tomatoes." It was the first wedding of my memory, so no wonder I can recall every detail of Jane's dress, which was of a stiff white muslin. As Jane was very tall and very thin and the shade of ebony, she must have looked lovely. I remember feeling hurt because mammy said Jane was skinny. I think mammy did not like the match.

Mesty's full name was Mephistopheles, a name given to him by a young uncle home from college whom mammy had entreated to "name de baby." Marse Will had been asked to give "a real gran', highfalutin name," and mammy was much pleased with the result. "De onliest fault wid dat name is it don't come handy to your mind," she said; so she called him "Mesty" for daily use, asking occasionally, "Marse Will, would you min' sayin' dat chile's name over ag'in?"

In my grandmother's garden there were beds of a mossy green plant that bloomed in hundreds of yellow and white and red satiny blossoms every day, and had tiny silvery seeds that burst from their pointed caps when you tried to pick them. These satiny blooms had a long name, portulaca, which captivated my ear by its romantic foreign sound. And there was a great bed of petunias. Never were blossoms more loved. You could do so many things with them! You could make lovely dolls. First, you picked the petunia, and after you had pulled the green stem off and sucked the honey out, you could slip any number of other blossoms on the long, slender flower-stalk, thus forming a flounced gown, finishing the whole effect by sticking a bud on top for a head. When you had exhausted the daily novelty of Madam and the Misses Petunia, you could blow elfin music through the dainty purple-and-white trumpets. Lastly, you could watch the bees and bumblebees that came buzzing and droning about before creeping into the sweet, sticky cups of your favorites; and as the day declined, humming-birds hovered on swift wings over the blossoms and dipped their long, slender bills down into the

very depths of their chalices, while great gray moths, looking like first cousins to the humming-birds, fluttered after them. In the lower end of the garden a shallow stream swept with swift current over its rocky bed, and tall iris blossoms waved purple banners amid their lance-like leaves. Silver-stemmed alder-bushes bore great fronds of creamy white blossoms that made lovely parasols to play lady with, and later, as their beauty waned, the white blooms changed into dark wine-red clusters of berries that served the same purpose. There were many useful things in my grandmother's garden; poke-berries, for instance. I wager no belle on Broadway ever felt more perfectly attired than I, with my cheeks painted a glowing poke-berry red, a horse-radish leaf for a fan, and my auburn locks shielded from the sun by an alderberry sunshade. At each end of the porch-steps stood great tubs of hydrangeas that had fairylike flowers that were green one day, white the next, then blushed into a faint pink that in time gave way to a delicate lavender. I have seen many hydrangeas since, but they were just hydrangeas, with nothing magical about them, and I had not the least inclination to stand watching them for hours in the hope that some time the magical changes would take place while I was looking.

While little Liz had no regular occupation, there were two offices she sometimes unwillingly filled, in neither of which, truth compels me to admit, was she a success. She sometimes fanned my grandmother during her afternoon nap, but she would get sleepy herself, and hit my grandmother on that august feature of her face, the nose. Then, too, when she kept the flies off the table, she would dip the fly-brush



John Watcott Adams.

"My grandmother's governesses always came from Brattleboro, Vermont"

into the butter. I clearly remember the glories of that fly-brush. It was made of peacocks' feathers, which glowed and gleamed like jewels as little Liz slowly waved it to and fro. We had no flowers in the middle of the table in that early time. A silver castor, holding tall cut-glass bottles for vinegar, pepper, mustard, and catsup, occupied the place of honor. This was flanked by a silver dish, set rather high on four legs, in which reposed a huge lump of yellow butter. When I read that passage in Judges where Jael "brought forth butter in a lordly dish," I think of the butter-dish of my childhood.

All my father's sisters took music lessons, and my mother played and sang also, as did her two sisters. I know there were three pianos in the house, one in the parlor, one in the sitting-room, and one in the school-room. Perhaps this may account for

my father's detestation of the instrument; then, poor man, he had no ear for music and could not turn a tune.

In those days music was a necessary accomplishment to ladyhood. If you had any talent, well and good; if not, still well and good. To be a lady, you must play on the piano, and down you sat on the piano-stool and practised and counted your "one and two and three" through your weary daily hour. It was the same way with poetry. You might have no taste for it, but a lady should like poetry, and consequently we memorized whole books. I could at one time repeat "The Lady of the Lake," entire reams of Thomas Moore, many of Mrs. Hemans's shorter poems, an occasional fragment of Byron, who was thought terrifically wicked, and was consequently a great favorite. I did not begin Tennyson until much later in life, at the mature age of sixteen.

My grandmother's governesses always came from Brattleboro, Vermont. That may seem queer, but one succeeded the other from that town. The ladies, once imported, shared the family life out of school hours, and in due time married. Beside my grandmother's daughters, several young granddaughters and nieces came to school, so the big school-room built just across the court from the back porch was a gay scene. The last year we lived in Kentucky, for some reason we had no governess, and all the children drove into Stanford to school in what we called a rockaway. Once out of sight of the house, a young aunt, famous for her handling of the whip, stood up in the front of the carriage and drove with the driving of Jehu, so as to distance two boy cousins who rode to school on their ponies. The Lord was surely very good to us, for I do not recall that any were killed or maimed.

A room called the "lower room," because it was reached by steps from my grandmother's room, was where all the children congregated in the evening to crack nuts, eat apples, pop corn, and tell stories. The advantages of all these amusements for a lady of my years was questionable, as the "raw head and bloody bones" with which one young relative embellished her narration occasionally disturbed my sleep even at that time of my life, though it was delightful. Here I heard the story of the tar baby thirty years before *Uncle Remus* told it. And we sang many a hymn, which mammy called a "hime." In one the words ran thus:

Some said dat John de Baptist
War nothin' but a Jew,
But the Bible doth inform us
That he was a preacher, too.

(Chorus)

I been listenin' all the night-time,
Been listenin' all the day,
Been listenin' all the night-time,
To hear some sinner pray.

Others were:

Who am dese dat am dressed in red?
Day is dem dat is riz from de dead.
Who am dese dat am dressed in white?
Day is de chillen of de Israelite.

Holy, Holy, my Lord 's Holy!
Holy, Holy, blood off the land!
Christian has a right to shout,
Blood off the land!
He 'll improve it, I 've no doubt!
Blood off the land!

In more mature years it has dawned on me that "blood off the land" may have been intended for "blood of the lamb," but the negroes sang "Blood off the land."

Saturday night was a time of great festivity for the negro. It was then that he went up to the big house to get his pass. If he was married to a woman who was owned on a neighboring place, he was permitted to stay all night, returning before seven o'clock Sunday night. Or perhaps he was merely "co'tin' Marse Tom Breckinridge's Sallie," in which case he must return by twelve o'clock Saturday. Anyway, it was fatal to be caught out without a pass. My father always had a great distaste for men who called on Saturday or Sunday night. He said that a gentleman (laying great stress on the word) had leisure to call during the week. Forty years after slavery was done away with, to him they were still negro nights.

In such a composite household, in a State noted for its hospitality, there were, of course, a great many guests coming and going. The big bedroom

opening out of the parlor was called the "beaus' room," for every one who came at night was asked to stay all night. We lived about fifteen miles from Danville, and seven from Stanford, and though the turnpike made the house easy of access, the beaus were nevertheless always asked to stay all night, and this room, with two big beds in it (for four might elect to stay), was always kept in readiness for them. I can recall the mortification of my younger aunts, after we moved to Illinois, because my grandfather, with his old-fashioned Southern hospitality,

would come into the parlor and ask their beaus to stay all night.

Of course there were carriages on the place. I can recall the glories of a stately, satin-lined closed carriage sacred to my grandmother. It had a set of four folding-steps that a negro man, seated beside the driver, let down when he opened the carriage-door. A barouche and a rockaway were for more common use, but all the young women of the household rode on horseback. When they went to church they buttoned a linen riding-skirt round their slender waists, put on a cape to keep



"It was then that he went up to the big house to get his pass"

off the dust, and rode to church, to be met by a dozen gallant hands eager to hand them down at the church horse-block. They slipped off the linen riding-skirt and cape, hung them on the horn of the saddle, and were all ready to be escorted up the aisle by the favored swain, who of course came home to dinner and perhaps stayed all night.

My mother was married in Jamestown, a Cumberland Mountain village. The roads were cut from the solid rock of the mountain-side, and so steep was the winding way that her piano had to be brought twenty-five miles from the river by men who carried it on their shoulders. I have heard her sisters say she wore a white book muslin, made with a double skirt, with a wide hem to match the lower hem. She was married in April, and had the lovely white dogwood for her wedding blossoms. The next morning the bride of eighteen started with her husband, who was twenty years old, to ride on horseback to his father's home, where the "infare" was to be held, taking her trousseau in a pair of saddle-bags swung across the groom's horse, and a carpet-bag hung from the horn of her own saddle. She had a leghorn bonnet, tied modestly under her girlish chin by a pink ribbon. This leghorn bonnet was a bonnet worthy of the name; it was no ephemeral adornment for a single season. Costing the great sum of thirty dollars, it was expected to last a goodly time; and although it was my mother's wedding bonnet, I remember it well.

Ordinarily, a much-ruffled white sun-bonnet guarded the ladies' complexions from spot or stain. These were the days when the complexion really flourished; no modern powders or paints would be countenanced. To say a girl painted was to condemn her as defi-

cient in some moral as well as physical sense, and Madam Grundy permitted only a starch bag, as a sort of compromise measure. I remember I used to get so hot, with my sunbonnet tied tightly under my small chin to preserve my too easily freckled cheeks, that I would push the bonnet back; but my mother was determined that I should at least preserve the one alleviation for my hair, and she worked a buttonhole in the top of my sunbonnet, drew a long, red curl through it, and pinned or tied the curl so that it would cruelly pull if I tried to push the bonnet back.

Young ladies took great care of their hands, wearing gloves at night and often during the morning hours. I heard of one who used to put iron thimbles on her fingers at night, draw on gloves, and sleep thus, in the effort to gain the much-admired tapering fingers. Curls were much admired. A girl whose hair could be curled in numberless rows of curls was counted a fortunate woman. I do not think that people paid as much attention to what was becoming or fitting as they do now. There were, to be sure, certain broad rules that one never transgressed. A fair-skinned person had to wear blue and green; a dark one, pink and red.

People became old much sooner then than now. I often wonder what my grandmother would think of my uncovered white head. I fear she would feel it quite immodest. Grandmother put on caps tied in a big bow under her chin when she was thirty. But it was not the fashion to have white hair. If nature silvered her locks, certain secret hours spent alone in her own room sent grandmama forth with shining dark bands peeping from the snowy folds of her muslin cap.